



Brands of youth citizenship and the politics of scale: National Citizen Service in the United Kingdom



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the politics of scale in the context of youth citizenship. We propose the concept of 'brands of youth citizenship' to understand recent shifts in the state promotion of citizenship formations for young people, and demonstrate how scale is crucial to that agenda. As such, we push forward debates on the scaling of citizenship more broadly through an examination of the imaginative and institutional geographies of learning to be a citizen. The paper's empirical focus is a state-funded youth programme in the UK – National Citizen Service – launched in 2011 and now reaching tens of thousands of 15–17 year olds. We demonstrate the 'branding' of youth citizenship, cast here in terms of social action and designed to create a particular type of citizen-subject. Original research with key architects, delivery providers and young people demonstrates two key points of interest. First, that the scales of youth citizenship embedded in NCS promote engagement at the local scale, as part of a national collective, whilst the global scale is curiously absent. Second, that discourses of youth citizenship are increasingly mobilised alongside ideas of Britishness yet fractured by the geographies of devolution. Overall, the paper explores the scalar politics and performance of youth citizenship, the tensions therein, and the wider implications of this study for both political geographers and society more broadly at a time of heated debate about youthful politics in the United Kingdom and beyond.

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1. Introduction

Citizenship is one of the most contested concepts across the social and political sciences, with a wealth of research examining its complex formations, expressions, politics and poetics (Heater, 2004; Ho, 2014; Isin, 2002; Yarwood, 2013). Political geographers have conceptualised and understood citizenship in different ways (for an excellent review see Staeheli, 2011) and key editorials have highlighted the analytical purchase of *scale* in such work (Desforges, Jones, & Woods, 2005; Painter & Philo, 1995). Indeed, as Marston and Mitchell state, "geographical scale is centrally implicated in producing and sustaining citizenship formations" (2004: 730; see also Mitchell, 2003). Scale has also been emphasised as a conceptual entry point by those working on the wider political geographies of children and young people (Hopkins & Alexander, 2010; Mills & Duckett, 2016; Skelton, 2010, 2013) and used as a

key concept in some studies on citizenship education (e.g. Wood, 2012a). And yet, crucial and provocative questions remain on the scaling of youth citizenship and the institutional geographies of 'learning to be a citizen' (Jeffrey & Staeheli, 2016; Mills, 2013) that this article attends to as part of a two-fold agenda.

First, how do scalar imaginations and institutional geographies of youth citizenship emerge, take shape and cement themselves as part of state projects? We are concerned with how citizenship is used as a rhetorical device and 'buzzword' to mobilise and manufacture particular engagements and (dis)connections at different spatial scales. This does not mean we believe in limiting the *location* of citizenship to sites and scales (see Staeheli, Marshall, & Maynard, 2016 on these debates), but rather we focus on the multiple scales (and interactions between scales) that shape these state dynamics of (youth) citizenship. Second, how are the nested scalar ideas that geographers are so familiar with (i.e. local, national, global) fractured and re-configured by the political geographies of the state in the context of youth citizenship? Our focus is to interrogate how such geographies are influenced by broader political ideologies, policies and processes.

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In exploring these questions, and interrogating how the scaling of youth citizenship matters, this paper makes two key contributions to academic debates at the confluence of work on being/becoming citizens, being/becoming political, and being/becoming adults (Philo & Smith, 2003; Kallio & Häkli, 2011, 2015; Skelton, 2010, 2013; Staeheli, Attoh, & Mitchell, 2013; see also; Uprichard, 2008). First, the paper proposes the concept of 'brands' of youth citizenship to understand recent shifts in the state promotion of youth citizenship formations. We offer this term to capture attempts to formally build and mobilise youth citizenship in nation-states and make particular types of citizen-subject. In so doing, we offer a much needed focus on how different forms of P/political engagement at different scales are promoted to young people as part of wider state projects. This focus enriches work on the geographies of youth citizenship and citizenship education (Mills, 2013; Pykett, 2010; Staeheli & Hammett, 2010; Wood, 2012a) by emphasising the multiple actors that design a 'model' of youth citizenship and shape these scalar institutional geographies. Furthermore, we question the extent to which the organisational spaces associated with such projects are actually *about* citizenship (mirroring its wider definitional dilemmas) and expose how a certain 'brand' of youth citizenship is presently being used by the neoliberal state. Second, the paper importantly considers the often neglected processes of state-formation and governance – namely devolution – and diffuse ideologies with growing political currency – namely Britishness – that challenge such 'neat' scalar containers. This focus on devolution is an important contribution to work on young people's political geographies (Hopkins, 2015; Mills & Duckett, 2016), with a study that takes the United Kingdom as its focus, posing timely questions about the relationship between (youth) citizenship, national identity and belonging. We bring into sharp relief the uneven geographies of learning to be a citizen, revealing the multiple scalar fractures and fissures that crystallise in such projects, reflecting wider tensions and potential opportunities.

To explore the above questions and make these novel contributions, this paper uses the example of a large state-funded youth citizenship programme that is fundamentally re-shaping the landscape of youth work and youth policy in the United Kingdom. We draw on the case-study of National Citizen Service (NCS) – that describes itself as the fastest growing youth movement in the UK for a century – to demonstrate the scalar politics and performance of youth citizenship and tensions therein. NCS is a short-term state-funded voluntary youth scheme motivated by wider policy objectives and is at the centre of a push by the UK Government to foster 'generation citizen' (Birdwell & Bani, 2014). Despite a long history of youthful citizenship training by the state and civil society via spaces of formal and informal education (Mills, 2013), this landscape is undergoing significant transformations since the emergence of NCS in 2011. Active citizenship – the performative practices of responsible citizens – is ubiquitous with youth volunteering schemes. Yet this recent attempt by the UK Government to create and mould active citizens is operating at a time of increased pressure for young people to pursue the 'cult of experience' (Holdsworth, 2015) and boost CVs in precarious economic times. These dynamics are part of wider ideas about transitions to a 'successful' adulthood, differently imagined and experienced across the Global North and South in relation to employment or education (see for example Esson, 2013 on Ghana; Cheng, 2014 on Singapore).

The paper is structured in five remaining sections. First, we flesh out the conceptual ideas surrounding youth citizenship and related debates in the literature. Second, we provide an overview of National Citizen Service as a case-study and our research project methodology. We then present a detailed empirical discussion in two sections that map onto our two-fold agenda. The paper's

conclusion outlines the importance of this paper's contributions to knowledge in political geography and beyond.

2. Making (young) citizens: scale, P/politics and pedagogical spaces

The study of youth citizenship has been an important strand of the recent, vibrant growth of young people's political geographies (Benwell & Hopkins, 2016; Mills & Duckett, 2016; Philo & Smith, 2003; Skelton, 2010, 2013). Research in this field has examined the various spaces and strategies that construct young people as citizens (in the making), how children and young people experience rights and responsibilities in different geographical contexts, and how young people engage in everyday or alternative performances of citizenship (e.g. Mills, 2013; Pykett, 2010; Staeheli & Hammett, 2010; Wood, 2012b). Across the board, researchers working in this area have advocated the importance of age as a marker of social difference, as part of a wider intellectual project on children and young people's geographies. Children and young people lie at the heart of the wider philosophical idea that citizens can be 'made', and as such, they have collectively been seen as *in need of training* for well over a century by state actors and other institutions in civil society. It is not surprising then that most research on youth citizenship by political geographers has focused on educational sites and settings, with citizenship education examined as a pedagogical policy, process and political tool. Spaces of formal and informal education grapple with the dual positioning of children and young people as both future adult citizens and current 'active' citizens within a wider moral landscape of childhood (Mills, 2013) and in relation to wider nation-building processes (see, for example, Ferguson, 2003 on Zambia; Cheney, 2007 on Uganda; Jones, Merriman, & Mills, 2016 on Wales).

Studies on citizenship education have often emphasised spatiality and scale (Mitchell, 2003), for example exploring the construction of national and post-colonial formal educational curriculums (Pykett, 2010; Staeheli & Hammett, 2010; Wainaina, Arnot, & Chege, 2011), the nation-building projects of voluntary youth movements (Jones et al., 2016; Mills, 2013) or (inter)national NGO programmes and activities in post-conflict settings (Jeffrey & Staeheli, 2016; Nagel & Staeheli, 2016). Bronwyn Wood (2012a) makes a compelling case to consider the multiple scales of youth citizenship in her study of New Zealand's curriculum, and others such as Susie Weller (2003) have shown how a national curriculum may not account for teenager's own political 'acts' of citizenship at the local scale (see also Wood, 2012b on liminal politics). This work links to a key focus within the study of young people's political geographies on their experiences as political beings (not just becomings), couched in terms of the dualism between Politics, that is formal state processes and expressions; and politics, as everyday or personal politics (Flint, 2003; Philo & Smith, 2003; see also Kraftl, 2013 on going 'beyond politics').

We know that the local, national and global scale are not neat containers, but that scale is relational, socially constructed, and that multi-scalar geographies shape society, politics and everyday life (Herod, 2009; Marston, 2000; Newstead, Reid, & Sparke, 2003). Yet as the introduction to our paper outlined, scope remains to examine how scalar imaginations and institutional geographies (Philo & Parr, 2000) of youth citizenship emerge, take shape and cement themselves as part of state projects. This contributes to wider, long-standing debates in political geography on the state, citizenship and politics of scale (Desforges et al., 2005; Marston & Mitchell, 2004; Painter & Philo, 1995) and the scales of children and young people's everyday lives (Ansell, 2009; Hopkins, 2007; Hopkins & Alexander, 2010). In a recent intervention, Staeheli et al. (2016) call for a focus on the 'circulations' that constitute

and give meaning to citizenship, to move attention away from the national and local level. They discuss ‘floating sites’ of citizenship formation – through the example of international conferences for young people – and the role of networks in circulating, amongst other things, norms and practices of citizenship. Here, we also focus on processes of citizenship formation, but propose the idea of ‘brands of youth citizenship’ to further unpack these dynamics in the context of the nation-state and wider scalar politics. We follow Ho’s definition that “citizenship confers legal status but is also defined in terms of political and social inclusion ... [it] functions as a social compact between citizens and the state” (2014: 1). In this paper, we are concerned with the place and power of citizenship discourses, specifically in relation to how this ‘compact’ is branded for young people.

As well as the definitional dilemmas of citizenship in academic work, hinted at in this paper’s discussion so far, the term is also contested in the way that policies and organisations are labelled as being *about* citizenship and what *counts* as citizenship. As a ‘buzzword’ in youth policy and young people’s services, citizenship is continually used – sometimes problematically – as a synonym for participation, belonging, community, engagement, or a sense of national identity (on these debates, see Percy-Smith, 2010) and there are myriad ways that young people themselves conceive of citizenship (Lister, Smith, Middleton, & Cox, 2003; Weller, 2003). There is a real need for research that considers these two arenas in tandem, not least in the United Kingdom at a time of heated debate about national identity, belonging and young people’s politics. In this geographical context, ‘active’ citizenship is most often associated with young people’s spaces as part of a wider historical trajectory in the voluntary sector (Mills, 2013).

In recent years, state endorsed citizenship training has moved more firmly onto the political agenda, for example the changing role and nature of the UK citizenship test (Turner, 2014) and the introduction of formal citizenship education in English schools in 2002 (Pykett, 2007). As Jason Wood notes, ‘young people [in the UK] have been subjected to an increasing number of interventions designed to prepare them for ‘active citizenship’ over the past decade’ (2010: 50). These have been launched by successive governments to deal with the ‘democratic deficit’ (Cockburn, 2009; Kisby & Sloam, 2012) as part of broader shifts in UK youth policy over the past few decades (Sloam, 2012; Williamson, 1993; Wylie, 2015). The latest government scheme – National Citizen Service (NCS) launched in 2011 – represents a crucial turning point in this wider genealogy of youth citizenship training. NCS is a state-funded voluntary youth programme for 15–17 year olds currently operating in England and Northern Ireland for the ‘lessons they don’t teach in class’ (NCS Trust 2016). The emergence and activities of NCS are interesting for a number of reasons, and this case-study is as yet unexamined in the geography literature (in political science, see Mycock & Tonge, 2011). However, we are using this example here to address our two wider aims in this paper and contribute to ongoing debates on the political geographies of youth citizenship.

Our first aim is to interrogate the scaling of youth citizenship as part of the institutional geographies that coalesce around ‘learning to be a citizen’. We propose the concept of ‘brands of youth citizenship’ to go beyond discussions of the hyphenated labels given to citizenship formations (e.g. active, multicultural or cosmopolitan citizenship) and to instead conceive of a particular framing, vision and ‘branding’ of citizenship crafted by the state. This paper uses the example of NCS to demonstrate how a brand of citizenship – cast in terms of social action – represents its policy drivers and encourages a particular type of neoliberal citizen in neoliberal times. We highlight the way the local, national and global scale are utilised or ignored by this state scheme as part of its programme,

delivered via a regional infrastructure and embodied performances. In this sense, the paper examines the scalar P/politics of youth citizenship and what counts as citizenship for its architects, stakeholders and young participants. We demonstrate how scales are imagined and embedded in the design and delivery of NCS by multiple actors, to ultimately ask what type of citizen for what kind of country?

Our second aim is to examine how these scales of youth citizenship operate in the context of wider political discourses and ‘pushes’, to question what happens to the ‘branding’ of youth citizenship when its model is challenged or called into question by wider political forces and processes. We show how the nested scalar containers of the local, national and global are fractured and re-configured by the political geographies of state governance and policy, in this context through concrete processes of devolution, as well as more diffuse ideas about ‘Britishness’. Over the last few decades, there have been increased calls for children and young people living in the UK to learn about ‘Britishness’, representing wider anxieties about national identity, multiculturalism, race and religion (Modood, 2005). These have often posited school and civic education as the panacea for a number of social and political tensions (Keddie, 2014). Here, we look beyond the space of school whilst also positioning NCS alongside some current trends on teaching British values in the classroom (DfE, 2014; see also Starkey, 2008), the growth of character education (Thorton, 2016) and the wider Prevent agenda (O’Toole, Meer, Nilsson DeHanas, Jones, & Modood, 2016). Although former Prime Minister David Cameron has rhetorically used NCS as an example of fostering ‘British’ identity, this paper importantly demonstrates the fractured geographies of NCS across the UK in relation to devolution (Hopkins, 2015; Mills & Duckett, 2016). Overall, our empirical case-study helps us to fulfil these two aims, and collectively the paper’s contribution demonstrates how scaling youth citizenship matters.

3. National Citizen Service

NCS is a short-term voluntary scheme for 15–17 year olds delivered across England and Northern Ireland that purports to give participants ‘the tools to change the world around them’ (NCS Trust 2016). Each year since its formal launch in 2011, the number of NCS participants has risen with an estimated 224,000 graduates to date and ambitious plans for one million graduates by 2020 (NCS Trust 2015). NCS has evolved from initial pilots of a six-week summer school-leaver programme to its contemporary offer of 3–4 weeks in summer, or shorter seasonal slots in autumn or spring half term. It is delivered by different regional providers including private sector partnerships, social enterprises and charitable youth organisations. Indeed, this scheme is tied into new neoliberal forms of governance and represents a diverse geography of service provision and re-configuration of the state-voluntary sector nexus. The NCS programme is designed to foster a ‘more cohesive, responsible and engaged society’ (NCS, 2012, p. 2) and begins with two residential experiences: an adventurous outdoor camp followed by an indoor residential, usually at a University halls of residence. The participants then return to their local communities and spend 30 hours planning and 30 hours delivering a social action project. ‘Step up to Serve’ – a separate cross-party campaign to increase opportunities for youth social action for 10–20 year olds – define social action as: ‘young people taking practical action in the service of others to create positive change’ (SUTS, 2016, p. 5). NCS is not compulsory, and participants pay £50 to join an NCS programme, although bursaries are available for hard-to-reach groups.

The emergence of NCS involved a number of actors and ‘architects’, some of whom were involved in other youth programmes in the voluntary and youth work sector and other individuals were

from political, consultancy or business backgrounds (de St Croix, 2011). Yet the idea for an NCS-like programme was initiated and driven by the Conservative Party leadership as early as 2005 prompted by a range of different concerns on community cohesion, the quality of youth work and a more diffuse sense that ‘something was needed’ to mark the transition to adulthood, and by extension full citizenship (see also Mycock & Tonge, 2011). As Staeheli and Hammett note, “it is telling that concerns about citizenship and the roles of educational systems in promoting it often surface at moments when solidarity and the need to reinforce national norms and stories are in doubt” (2010: 672). By 2007 however, the idea of a school-leaver programme was more firmly connected by the Conservative Party’s Green Paper to longer-standing ideas about ‘troublesome’, ‘in need’ or ‘at risk’ youth:

‘This programme will help young people to develop a sense of purpose, optimism and belonging which will reduce their desire to binge drink, carry weapons and take drugs. It will be a positive and potent weapon to tackle anti-social behaviour.’

(Conservatives, 2007, p. 1, emphasis added)

Historically, fears about the character, politics or behaviour of young people have been the motivation for a number of government policies. NCS marks a shift change however as an ideological programme with a universal offer for young people, whose activities – as ostensibly a form of youth work – were once the traditional purview of the voluntary sector or local authority youth clubs. Indeed, this is a youth programme not driven by the collective will of a voluntary base, or professional youth work practitioners, but from Whitehall.

The idea for NCS was trialled in 2008–9 and more fully developed throughout 2009–10 coupled with David Cameron’s vision for a ‘Big Society’ (Mohan, 2012; Mycock & Tonge, 2011). It is worth noting that whilst the rhetoric of the Big Society has since waned, the ideology still had a major impact on the delivery of public services under the coalition government of 2010–15 (Ishkanian & Szreter, 2012). NCS was showcased in a number of their policies, for example *Positive for Youth* (2011) that emerged shortly after the disturbances and riots in a number of English cities and the *Giving White Paper* (2011) that attempts to foster a new culture of British philanthropic values. However, the growth of NCS has occurred during a climate of austerity and huge cuts to public services that have disproportionately impacted young people (UNISON, 2014). Overall, despite the day-to-day management of NCS moving from the Cabinet Office to the NCS Trust in 2014, this youth programme remains the centrepiece of the Conservative Party’s youth policy and investment in young people’s services, with £297 million spent on the scheme up to Summer 2015 (HM Government, 2016).

3.1. Methodology

The wider study on which this paper is based examines the state’s motivations behind, the voluntary sector’s engagement with, and young people’s experiences of, National Citizen Service. The research undertaken was a mixed method project comprising eight research methods: archival fieldwork; policy analysis; an online survey of NCS graduates from 2011 to 2015 ($n = 407$); an ethnography of one NCS team of 9 young people in Summer 2015; a participatory animated white-board video of this team’s NCS ‘journey’; and three sets of semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted between Autumn 2014 – Spring 2016 with: first, eight ‘key architects’ of the NCS programme, namely policy makers, stakeholders and consultants who helped to design the scheme; second, twenty-two current and former NCS regional

delivery providers; finally, thirty NCS graduates who were purposefully sampled from the online survey in relation to region, year of participation and categories of social difference along lines of class, gender, race and religion.

A mixed methods approach (Sui & DeLyser, 2012) was used to tackle the challenge of providing a national overview of a scheme with diverse geographical coverage, whilst giving space for in-depth and sustained engagement with one NCS ‘wave’ used for the ethnography and animated video. This video – that uses a white-board style of showing the live drawing and animator’s hand – was produced collaboratively between the team of young people, authors, and a professional animating company based on the team’s participant diaries. The young people were given the opportunity to feedback and suggest edits to the storyboard and animator’s drafts at each stage of the process, ensuring it reflected their NCS ‘journey’. This video, along with the interviews (audio recorded and transcribed in full), policy documents and ethnographic field diary were analysed thematically, using NVivo10 where appropriate. Data from all the research methods is drawn upon in this paper’s discussion in relation to its outlined themes. To adhere to ethical considerations all identifying features have been anonymised within the data set and for the participatory elements of the project young people chose their own pseudonyms (Morrow, 2008). Nearly all of the young people who participated in this research project were under 18 and therefore informed consent was also obtained from parents/guardians to follow ethical guidelines. We also recognised however that young people aged 16–17 are competent social actors (Skelton, 2008), and in this case had opted-in to a scheme described as marking the “transition to adulthood” (Booth et al. 2014); we therefore engaged young people as much as possible through these participatory elements of the overall research methodology.

4. ‘This is our future’: the scalar politics and performance of NCS

This section examines the scales of youth citizenship that frame NCS and its moral geography of the ‘good’ citizen. We argue that NCS is a scheme powerfully crafted at the national scale, executed at the local scale through regional infrastructures and embodied performances, yet curiously silent about global issues, connections and identities. We demonstrate how these (scalar) ideas about citizenship were designed by the state through individual MPs, consultants, think-tanks and working groups, and we illustrate how delivery providers and young people understand and interpret this ‘brand’ on the ground.

In the most obvious sense, the programme’s name cements ideas about national citizens and immediately evokes a reference to National Service. This form of military conscription was introduced in the UK at the start of the Second World War and ran up until the early 1960s (Vinen, 2015). When interviewed, key NCS personnel were quick to distance themselves from these military overtones and the only connection to National Service that was made was the same ability to create a ‘shared experience’ that transcended social class. In the original working group tasked with designing NCS, the initial idea of picking the same age for all participants (originally 16) was linked to the idea of a future cross-national ‘ice-breaker’, as a key architect explains:

‘The feeling was whatever age it is, it should be something that is the same [...] So in ten years young people are, you know, you’re 26 or 36, they’re in the pub and they meet someone who they’ve never met before and they’re like, oh where did you do your NCS? And that was a kind of sense of a moment in time in the young person’s life.’

The time-spaces of NCS are important to note here. For those who designed NCS, it was just as much about a shared *temporal* experience at 16 (across the imagined community of the nation, see Anderson, 1983) as it was about a shared *spatial* lived experience (of being with a small group of others, say camping in the Peak District). This quote also emphasises the *experiential* rationale behind NCS – the ‘once in a lifetime’ factor – rather than the cyclical or layered pedagogical process of the national curriculum or longer staged structure of a voluntary youth movement and its regular activities. In trying to create a unified, embodied (yet one-off) experience, the state was seeking to create a shared emotional and affective ‘buzz’ around a series of activities that would then ‘spill over’ into everyday behaviours commensurate with their ideological construction of a ‘good’ citizen (Mills, 2013; Pykett, Seward, & Schaefer, 2010). Crucially, for NCS, we argue this revolves around social action – the implication being that these habits of increased levels of voluntary activity would then continue throughout the lifecourse. This chimes with a number of recent moves in the UK towards the construction and governance of citizens’ behaviours and ‘nudges’ (Jones, Pykett, & Whitehead, 2013). Although there is a universalising of the ‘good’ citizen here towards certain *practices* or *habits* rather than based on social difference or markers of identity, the ‘ideal’ citizen is still classed and racialized in relation to the target audience of NCS. There were, for example, racialized and classed discourses of community cohesion and ‘at risk’ youth in the scheme’s early framing, discussed in the previous section. Certainly in the branding and marketing of NCS, the ideal citizen is now multi-racial, male or female, with aspirational classed messages about higher education, CVs and life-skills. The ‘social mix’ of NCS graduates is primarily middle-class, with the evaluation of the 2014 Summer programme (Ipsos MORI, 2015) having 20% eligible for free school meals, 26% from ethnic minorities, although it still had on average far more female (71%) than male participants.

It is easy to be critical of this scheme’s name in the context of the increased militarisation of young people’s spaces (e.g. Wells, 2014) and the politics of national identity and devolution (discussed later). However, there were striking anecdotes recalled about the name of the programme by stakeholders:

‘I remember meeting a young guy ... and he said to me thank you for not dumbing down the name of this programme ... because it’s the first time in my life that I felt invited into being a citizen of this country.’

This sense of belonging and inclusive type of nation-building sentiment is significant (see Staeheli & Hammett, 2013) and is reflected in early straplines from the NCS website to ‘join a national movement’ super-imposed over a map of the British Isles. Furthermore, these ideas about the nation are linked to discourses of youth and futurity (Evans, 2010; Ruddick, 2003). A recent NCS advertising campaign (Fig. 1) cements these long-standing connections through presenting a group of young people with the strapline ‘This is our future’:

We read two messages here: first, the imitation of a young person’s voice through an individualised statement about their own (brighter) futures via NCS; and second, a message intended for the general public that these young people are the nation’s future – this emerging body of youth now engaged in social action, and of which the nation should be proud. Whilst policy-makers and champions of the scheme have described NCS as a ‘personal and social development’ programme, akin perhaps to the adventurous outdoor character-building activities of the Outward Bound Trust or Duke of Edinburgh Scheme, there is no denying that NCS is part of a state-funded nation-building project. The national scale is clearly a fundamental part of this scheme’s geographical imagination. However, in its execution on the ground, the ‘learning’ of citizenship within NCS is intended to take place at the *local* scale, although as we now explain this is shaped by regional geographies of provision and cast as a series of embodied performances.

The NCS experience is delivered by different regional providers and adult mentors with much smaller groups of young people in teams as part of local ‘waves’. The staged curriculum introduced earlier is prescriptive and broadly shaped by the NCS ‘ethos’. However, the daily programme within these structured weeks can be flexibly interpreted on the ground by each contracted provider, who often further devolve to a ‘local’ delivery provider for certain activities, although timetables are quality assured by NCS Trust. Week One’s residential, usually a few hours away from participant’s home location, has a real focus on adventurous outdoor learning. These activities – hiking, abseiling, canoeing – focus on the scale of the (able) body and are seen as taking participants out of their ‘comfort zone’. Furthermore, this branding dominates marketing material and represents historical connections to youthful citizenship training, rural landscapes and embodied (masculinised) performances of adventurous character-building activities (Freeman, 2011; Mills, 2013). The daily programme of Week Two – or ‘Skills Week’ – is varied across the whole of NCS, with regional differences



Fig. 1. ‘This is our future’.
Source: NCS Trust/Rankin, 2014.

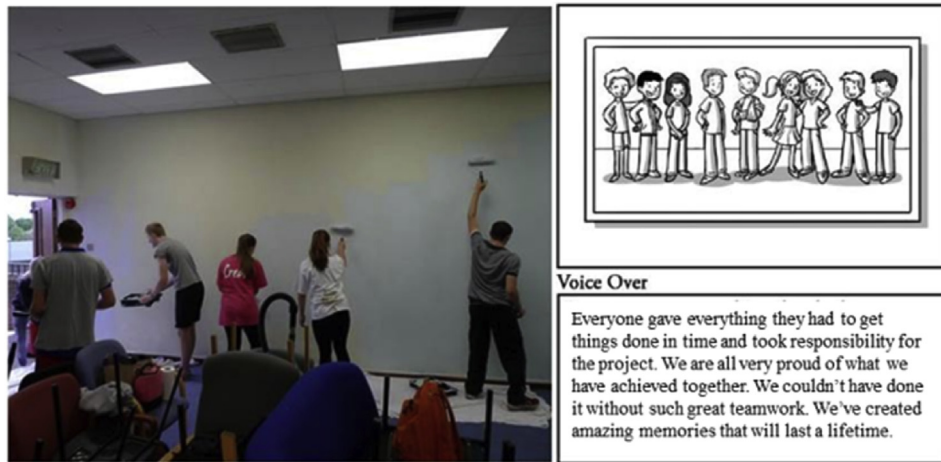


Fig. 2. 'Social action project'.

Source: Author's Photograph and Participants' Whiteboard Animation Still.

in the activities and workshops. For example, whereas most providers focus on team-building, social media strategies and 'Dragon's Den'¹ style entrepreneurial skills, others include mock elections and 'Political debates, and others organise first aid training, sports activities or apprenticeship activities such as bricklaying. Some participants, such as Emma (white, 16, no-one in paid work) from Lincolnshire, expressed frustrations that her regional provider had marginalised broadly 'Political activities within their programme:

'One of my favourite bits was when we ... had an afternoon where ... we were speaking our opinions and they gave us a question and then you had to go one side ... [or] another side ... [or] then in the middle ... But I loved that, and we only spent half an hour on it, I was so annoyed I just wanted that to last the whole day.'

The climax of an NCS programme is the social action project in Weeks 3 and 4. This locates the real arena for active citizenship in young people's own local towns, cities and villages, and in this sense, its 'brand' of citizenship is equated with 'community participation', 'service' or 'voluntary action'. Again, the scale of the body is worth highlighting here in the visible performative nature of most social action projects, such as painting, gardening or fundraising for local charities. These 'acts' of youth volunteering are often framed around local, everyday 'p'olitics, rather than expressions of formal 'P'olitics, democracy or activism. The centrality of social action as the end goal, with Weeks 1 and 2 understood by key architects of NCS as team-building training required to deliver a successful project in Weeks 3–4, is therefore indicative of the scheme's 'brand'. In relation to young people's experiences of the scheme however, 72% of our survey respondents stated that Week 1 was their favourite phase of NCS, with only 8% choosing 'planning and delivering social action'. This was echoed in our ethnographic participant's animated video diary, with Weeks 3–4 featuring far less than the two residential components. It is not surprising that the fun adventurous activities away from home with new friends received more attention, yet if the social action project is seen by state actors as the grand finale of this citizen-building programme, we can perhaps question its relative impact.

The realities of NCS social action projects are diverse and vary across the landscape of regional providers in the extent to which they are 'youth-led'. For example, in our ethnographic fieldwork, the social action task of redecorating a community room at a local college was pre-designed by regional NCS programme staff to ensure access and logistical planning (Fig. 2):

Whilst it was clear that this project provided a focused activity for our participants to develop life-skills, confidence and continue building incredibly strong friendships, this infrastructure framed the young people as *becomings*, rather than *beings* with the agency to create and decide their own project. Furthermore, there was some confusion amongst this team and their provider about whether this freshly-painted social space was used by the wider place-based community or the community of students attending college. Within other parts of our data-set however, we captured NCS projects that young people had actively created themselves, rather than their regional provider. For example, one team designed a project campaigning about train fares for students, as Dave (white, 18, living independently) from Surrey explains:

'... We did a [campaign] trying to lower the train fares for students ... And so we went into like [local college] and got people to sign a petition and put it on Facebook ... because some of us travel by train ... Because we ... we have to pay an adult fare ... Yeah, and so we thought it was like unfair that we're not adults but we have to pay the adult fare.'

Although most delivery providers focused on the local community impact of NCS' work when interviewed, aiming to change perceptions of young people as "scary hoodies", some did reflect on the emerging political subjectivities of NCS graduates:

'This lad [an NCS graduate] ... had said, I know how to change things now, I know who the mayor is, I know what the council does, I know how to raise money, and if something needs to be changed, I know how to do that now.'

It is clear then, that in some cases, NCS does host more explicit engagements with 'big P' politics. Yet the types of NCS projects described above by Dave – youth-led petitions and campaigns – rarely feature in official NCS promotional material. Instead, their social media feeds are full of stories where young people are collecting donations for local food banks or fundraising for local

¹ "Dragon's Den" is a popular TV show in the UK where budding entrepreneurs pitch their business idea to potential investors.

charities through bake sales – projects associated with a specific type of ‘good’ young citizen, not least in terms of class and gender. Clearly, NCS graduates are not a homogenous group, with many involved in formal politics and activism outside the time-spaces of NCS. Yet this discussion speaks to wider debates about young people’s political engagement (Kallio, 2007; Staeheli et al., 2013) and whether mechanisms for youth participation are meaningful or tokenistic (Matthews, 2001). Indeed, one of the biggest critiques of NCS has come from the youth work sector, understandably angered by financial cuts, who argue that young people are ‘not just citizens in the summer’ (UNITE, 2014, p. 15; de St Croix, 2011). We are not making normative value judgments about what type of citizenly ‘acts’ are political: painting a community room can be just as politically engaging as protesting (Jeffrey, 2013). Furthermore, we are not critiquing youth volunteering per se, with the benefits of this activity widely reported. However, we are highlighting that the model of NCS and its promotion of a particular brand of youth citizenship centred on social action as the number one tenant of being a ‘good’ citizen (rather than say, voting or democratic participation) tells a story about the state’s vision and priorities. It may seem obvious, but NCS participants are not likely to receive lessons in protesting or direct action from a government funded scheme in austere times (on these tensions, see Bradley, 2012). As such, we argue that the growth of this programme represents the encouragement of neoliberal citizen-subjects for a neoliberal state in neoliberal times, encouraging a ‘type’ of citizen that performs ‘safe’ and compliant acts of (youth) citizenship. In this sense, the NCS brand is more akin to Kennelly and Llewellyn’s (2011) ‘active compliance’ rather than a more participatory or justice orientated ‘type’ of citizen (see Johnson & Morris, 2010; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). We want to stress at this point that we are not trying to downplay how NCS can be a transformative moment for some young people. The official evaluations of NCS document positive impacts in young people’s lives (NatCen, 2012; 2013; Ipsos MORI, 2014, 2015) and in this study we have encountered some truly inspirational projects in local communities and powerful testimonials. Several research participants, regardless of social difference or region, described NCS as ‘life changing’, as Luke aged 17 from Norfolk expressed:

‘I just love it, it’s just been incredible. (pause) I just can’t believe really ... everything that’s happened ... I’m so thankful ...’

However, despite these positive testimonials, we think it is important to consider how these narratives are being politicised and the wider scales of youth citizenship at play.

Surprisingly, despite the increased transnational and cosmopolitan identities of young people as a result of globalisation and other social, economic and political transformations in recent decades (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2008; Nayak, 2003), NCS is curiously silent about the global scale. There is no international component to NCS or dedicated place for global issues to be discussed within its programme, and our overall analysis is that there is little awareness by providers or amongst participants about how their activities at the local scale are connected to global politics or challenges. Conversely, other youth schemes such as the British Council’s ‘Active Citizens’ initiative promote international exchanges between young people and are framed around notions of global citizenship and sustainable development. It is worth reflecting on this absence of the ‘global’ within NCS. In part, this may be due to the separate ‘International Citizen Service’ also launched in 2011 (Griffiths, 2016); and yet, there seems little dialogue between the two youth programmes, despite their linked history and initial working groups.

The investment in NCS – as the larger and more visible

programme of the two – suggests that the government’s focus is on promoting certain *national* values and engagement with *local* communities, rather than a global or cosmopolitan form of citizenship. Seán Murphy’s (2014) critical appraisal of NCS has also described a “narrowing of citizenship horizons” in this global context and reflects on young people’s digital and transnational identities. The absence of the global outlined above may be an attempt to ‘return’ to the local and proximate, in order to combat the classed opportunities of overseas gap years and VSO programmes (Baillie-Smith & Laurie, 2011). However, we would argue that the lack of the ‘global’ within NCS positions a global sense of place as something additional, ‘bolted-on’ and thereby optional, rather than part and parcel of citizenship formation more generally. This framework, for us, marks a shift change from the state-led promotion of global and sustainable citizenship formations to young people in schools during the early 2000s, particularly in the context of environmentalism (Bullen & Whitehead, 2005) and wider constructions of the multicultural, global, flexible or cosmopolitan citizen in neoliberal times (Mitchell, 2003; Ong, 1999; Osler & Starkey, 2003). Overall, the primacy of the local and the national outlined here in this paper harbours some wider constructions of young people as fixed and rooted, rather than mobile or transnational (Hörschelmann & El Refaie, 2014; Smith, Rérat, & Sage, 2014), as well as a certain nationalistic and patriotic brand of citizenship.

We end this section with some overall reflections on definitions of youth citizenship and wider policy connections. 86% of respondents to our online survey gave a positive response to whether NCS had helped them to understand what it means to be a citizen (with 42% of those expressing that they had learned a ‘lot’ more). Yet in individual interviews, understandings of citizenship were more diffuse and ambiguous. For example Ravi (British Asian, 18, Greater Manchester) recalls:

‘I’m still unsure what they describe as citizenship to be honest, they could really touch upon it a bit more. They probably just don’t use the word enough, but they probably do describe it a lot, obviously with the social action, giving back to community, that kind of thing, but they don’t really say that it’s part of citizenship, I obviously now assume that it is.’

Amongst research participants across different regional contexts, it was clear graduates felt that being a citizen was about their actions in their *local* communities. Yet we also saw a blurred understanding in how participants talked about citizenship and community. As Sophie (white, 17, from Essex) reflects:

‘I think the social action project definitely helped with being a citizen, but I found out a lot more about the community, I didn’t know the problems there were.’

The wider interplay and synonym-swapping of citizenship and community in our data-set reflects academic debates on these definitional dilemmas (Closs Stephens & Squire, 2012; Staeheli, 2008). But this also reflects an ‘identity crisis’ for NCS on the ground, cemented in its name and reflected in its politics of scale. Over the course of this research project, NCS has been described to us by policymakers, MPs, ‘architects’, advocates, employees and volunteers as ‘about’ the following policy aims and areas (in no particular order): active citizenship; social action; young people’s services and youth work; youth volunteering; wellbeing and mental health; troubled families; NEETS²; community

² A ‘NEET’ is a young person “Not in Education, Employment or Training”.

engagement; social mixing; transitions to adulthood; young people's political participation; tackling youth unemployment; character education; 'Big Society' and giving; entrepreneurship and life-skills. This 'identity crisis' around policy trends and the shifting focus within government and Whitehall (not least in relation to certain groups of young people and social class) creates tensions when attempts are made to unify a cohesive message about the scheme and its universal impact in potentially all young people's lives. This policy landscape also represents the focus of Westminster, rather than that of the devolved administrations of the United Kingdom, further highlighting the *scales* of youth citizenship discussed in this paper. Furthermore, this policy framework is then complicated by NCS' additional claim to be a vehicle for 'Britishness', leading us to our second discussion on the wider political geographies of the state and the fractures and fissures that challenge 'brands' of youth citizenship.

5. 'Time to inspire Britain's teenagers': Britishness and devolution

The Conservative Party Green Paper *'It's time to inspire Britain's teenagers'* (2007) proposed a vision for a school-leaver programme and is a crucial document in tracing the genealogy of NCS and its scalar connections. The front cover contains an image of a young person holding a Union Flag high in the blustering wind – the colour image bursting with red, white and blue against the grey silhouette of a young body. This document was produced in consultation with a charitable working group of varied stakeholders called the *Young Adult Trust*, with several practical ideas taken forward into the eventual launch of NCS, for example the staged week structure and primacy of social action. We can also read more diffuse ideas in this document that have since been marginalised in the programme's branding, but that reveal some of the original motivations behind NCS. For example, the paper refers to 'adult traits' and 'characteristics' that young people completing NCS would achieve. Indeed, we argue that NCS is a sustained attempt by the UK Government to 'couple' citizenship and adulthood together as dual goals for young people to reach 'successfully'. These markers of 'adult status' included commitment, avoiding harmful behaviour, and significantly, developing an understanding of 'what they believe it is to be a British citizen' (Conservatives, 2007, p. 19). Early ideas for residential activities in this working paper included an evening discussion on 'exploring adulthood' with the question prompts: 'What is an adult? What is commitment? Britishness? Sex/relationships? Who do I admire? Is revenge always bad?' (ibid: 13). Although these discussion topics were not used during the ethnographic and participatory research we conducted, their presence in this Green Paper reveals early connections and key themes underlying NCS. These somewhat disparate connections between adulthood and sense of British identity continue in the document with a proposed graduation ceremony with clear connections to 'Big P' politics. For example, participants would receive a certificate signed by the Prime Minister and 'each young person will be given the opportunity to state what it means to them to be an adult British citizen and how they view their future' (ibid: 11). The reality of these graduation ceremonies – also described in this Green Paper as an opportunity to 'affirm our shared citizenship' – have since been toned down. In reality, NCS graduation usually consists of a local or regional event with a prize-giving style atmosphere and awards (but do include a certificate signed by the PM) celebrating the achievements of young people. And yet, the notion of graduating from an informal four-week programme evokes a sense of educational attainment and is used to mark the performative 'end' to this journey; the NCS model and its institutional geographies frame this moment as marking the transition to

a finished product.

As Nancy Worth (2009) has so skilfully argued, and others have discussed, one of the issues with theories of youth transition is that it frames youth as becoming and adults as being, when we are all developing and not the 'finished article'. With a scheme like NCS however, it manufactures that end point through the materialities of certificates and the performance of a graduation ceremony (on these debates see Byrne, 2014). In this sense, we can see how the transition to adulthood and/or citizenship is *staged by the state* and linked together within NCS: to be a 'complete' adult is to be a 'full' citizen and vice versa. Those individuals who make up the collective body of NCS graduates (the nation's future from Fig. 1) are then cast, in some contexts, as a particular type of *British* citizen. For example, in a graduation video produced by one (English) NCS provider (NCS Ingeus 2015) the voiceover states:

'This year get ready for a new breed of British hero ... thanks to their hard work and their bright futures, Britain as we know it will never be the same'.

That same video presents this 'new breed' of citizen as emerging 'in a world where apathy was King ...', drawing on popular representations of youth as apathetic, disengaged and lazy, thereby distinguishing NCS graduates as 'good' citizens. A sense of active citizenship therefore remains at the crux of the NCS philosophy and its moral geography. The distinctly British framework that this video and other features of NCS material culture represent is, however, problematic in the context of devolution and wider UK politics.

The process of NCS 'rolling out' from England has been slow and tension-ridden, with fragmented decisions over whether to 'take up' this scheme by the devolved administrations in other parts of the United Kingdom. In 2012, the scheme was piloted in Northern Ireland and fully adopted there in 2015. There was also a pilot in Wales in Autumn 2014 but NCS has not been adopted by Welsh Government at the time of writing. In both pilots, the format of NCS was negotiated, for example the cost of £50 per participant in England was waived in Wales where a youth work manifesto ensures youth work is free at the point of delivery. There is currently no NCS presence in Scotland, with one MP in Westminster stating in an interview that "Scotland remains uncracked", implicitly referring to the political landscape in Scotland after the recent referendum on independence. Ironically, those aged 16–17 living in Scotland (the exact target age range of NCS) were afforded a more formal (and perhaps meaningful) 'experience' of citizenship with the right to vote during the 2014 referendum (Hopkins, 2015; Mills & Duckett, 2016; Sharp, Cumbers, Painter, & Wood, 2014).

In terms of approaches to devolved formats of NCS, a voluntary youth representative from Wales shared that as well as issues of language provision and the wider politics of a Labour government at that time, ultimately:

'We find there are a number of organisations that just decide that they're going to come into Wales ... they haven't really looked at what's here. You assume that it works the same as either England or Scotland or Northern Ireland and we all work so differently.'

These sentiments were also echoed in interviews with stakeholders in Northern Ireland, who recalled their initial fears that its 'brand' might be problematic:

'For some of our communities, the actual terminology of National Citizen Service doesn't go down too well either. Because it's seen to be more military or more English, more ... certainly

with the more Republican end of our communities, it wouldn't go down as well.'

They explained how 'tweaks' had been made in response to their concerns, including a change of emphasis in the "English focused" promotional material. There was also relief that the early logo – 'National Citizen Service' spelled out in red, white and blue – had been changed to the initials of 'NCS' in the shape of a brand savvy social media hashtag. As such, stakeholders reported very few problems in the scheme's delivery in Northern Ireland. However, the devolved politics of NCS creates wider questions in the context of this paper's overall discussion on the scales of youth citizenship embedded in its name. Indeed, which nation is being talked about in the context of a National – Citizen – Service? Can this scheme claim to be about 'inspiring British teenagers' when it does not operate in Scotland or Wales, but in England and Northern Ireland? And yet, the idea of NCS as a vehicle for *Britishness* is still being used in explicit political contexts. In a speech to the Conservative Party Conference in October 2015, then Prime Minister David Cameron stated:

'I want my children – I want all our children – to know they're part of something big – the proudest multi-racial democracy on earth. That's why we're making sure they learn British history at school. That's why we started National Citizen Service to bring different people together. I want them to grow up proud of our country ...'

In evoking emotive and long-standing connections between children, education and the future, we see here the attempt to create political subjectivities as part of a wider (British) state project (see also Jones et al., 2016). Furthermore, in positioning the role of formal education (school history lessons) alongside an informal voluntary programme (NCS), David Cameron presented a dual strategy for fostering a certain type of British civic identity. We would suggest however that the lines between formal and informal citizenship education are being sharply re-drawn. For example, the recent NCS Bill had in its earliest version as part of the 2016 Queens Speech, a statutory duty on all state secondary schools, academies, private schools and councils to promote NCS. That announcement, and further funding for the scheme of £1.2 billion, was also used as an opportunity for the then Prime Minister to cement these wider ideological connections discussed in this section, describing how "we are making NCS a permanent feature of British life" (Ricketts, 2016). The geographies of devolution however, tell a rather different story.

Furthermore, these geographies are likely to be shaped by the emerging post-Brexit landscape following the EU referendum in June 2016. Early signs are that the current Prime Minister Theresa May will continue to support and expand NCS. However, she is also grappling with a 'new' mapping of the Union along fragmented national mandates for 'Leave' or 'Remain', prompting the possibility of a second referendum on independence in Scotland (Matless, 2016). On the one hand, the English-centric geographies of NCS discussed here could be seen as adding to these tensions. We have already shown how, problematically, the model of NCS represents a wider retreat from the global scale (and as part of that, the supranational European scale) in its framework. On the other hand, we have seen increased calls in the weeks and months following the EU referendum for the importance of political and civic education. Could, therefore, a re-fashioned or re-imagined NCS be needed more than ever? Are there potential opportunities to re-align the scales of youth citizenship it currently hosts? It is too early to tell the full impact of the Brexit vote for young people living in the

United Kingdom and young people's politics. However, the place of National Citizen Service is firmly cemented in the Conservative Party's future plans and ambitions, and as such, is part of these wider narratives and dilemmas.

6. Conclusion

This paper has engaged with, and pushed forward, key debates on the scaling of youth citizenship, making two key contributions to disciplinary work on being/becoming citizens, being/becoming political, and being/becoming adults.

First, the paper has offered the concept of 'brands' of youth citizenship to understand how the state promotes youth citizenship formations. Using the example of NCS and its institutional geographies, the paper demonstrated how the state seeks to create, shape and govern citizens of the future through a scalar political imagination. This much-needed contribution to work on the geographies of youth citizenship emphasised the multiple actors in the design and delivery of a youth citizenship model and how scale is crucial to that agenda. Citizenship and adulthood are often used as powerful ideological tropes to mobilise wider (yet shifting) policy objectives, and we have shown in our study how the state has prioritised certain scales as part of its vision, namely the primacy of the national and local, with a retreat from the global. However, the regional infrastructure of the scheme is creating differences in the activities NCS 'hosts', and the extent to which young people are encouraged or enabled to pursue P/political activities based on their postcode. Our study has exposed the overall primacy of social action and the legitimacy given to certain types of community engagement and 'good' participation that reveal how this 'branding' of citizenship is being used by the neoliberal state to encourage a particular type of citizen-subject. We have demonstrated how ideas about being a 'good' citizen and a good 'young person' merge and mix, and would suggest this is set to continue in England with the recent push for character education within the Department for Education. Overall, we have gone beyond using labels for different types of hyphenated forms of citizenship formation to instead propose a focus on the branding of youth citizenship – a vision and set of scalar institutional strategies that transmit a model. In this case, one firmly cast in terms of social action, aligned with the state's broader political project.

Second, this paper has contributed an important focus to the often neglected processes of state-formation, governance and wider ideologies to such youth citizenship projects, with timely insights into challenging and competing visions of citizenship, belonging and national identity. In the context of NCS, the geographies of devolution have actively shaped (and curtailed) NCS provision and uptake across the UK, perhaps mirroring wider differences in youth policy across devolved administrations and their responses to Westminster's politics of voluntarism and the 'Big Society' (Woolvin, Mills, Hardill, & Rutherford, 2015). There should be greater sensitivity in geographical work to these themes, and future research could usefully map the different youth citizenship discourses in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also highlighted how the rhetoric of 'Britishness' has been used as a framing device for NCS, a further element in its 'brand' of youth citizenship, shaped by the wider political climate. Through our discussion, we contributed a focus on the uneven geographies of learning to be a citizen and the multiple scalar fractures and fissures within such training spaces. This timely contribution to work on young people's political geographies is needed more than ever after the recent EU referendum. Indeed, questions on the branding and scaling of youth citizenship should matter for all political geographers, not just those who study the geographies of children and young people.

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